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Priyanka Singla

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Roll No. A166831004,

Department of English,

UCBS&H, Guru Kashi University,

Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India

priyanka.ind81@gmail.com

Dr. Vijay Shankar Prasad

Research Guide, H.O.D., Department of English,

UCBS&H, Guru Kashi University,

Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India

prasadvijay30@yahoo.com

Treatment of Post-Colonial History in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Abstract: The present submission is a humble endeavour to survey Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* within the paradigm of the historical novel in an eclectic manner. Mistry refers to the political personages of the time indirectly. The dramatis personae in *A Fine Balance* are martyr-like victims of the Internal Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Mistry has recorded the tragic dehumanization of Indians by the ruling party and the administration. The Internal Emergency was universally condemned. The Western nations were in the forefront of this criticism. As an Indian diasporic writer based in Canada, Mistry has tried to express his dismay and disapproval of all that was going on in the post colonial India. This makes *A Fine Balance* a noble piece of post colonial historical fiction.

Keywords: History, Post Colonialism, Anti-colonialism, Repression, Minorities, Diaspora

The history of human society is a complex of countless stages and landmarks. All philosophies have their unique perceptions of history. Marxism looks upon history as basically a manifestation and outcome of class-struggle. In common sense parlance, history is a record of the events of the past. The novel, a very potent modern genre, launches its forays into various fields. Sometimes, there is a very curious and provocative amalgam of history and fiction. The upshot of this blending is the well known sub genre designated as the historical novel. Sometimes, this type of novel becomes a unique source of both entertainment and instruction. The historical novel is a very diverting and edifying form of literature. It is sometimes said that the term 'historical novel' is riddled with an inherent inconsistency. It is stressed that these two terms have been coalesced into a sort of misalliance. The basis of history is fact and that of novel is fiction. One sub genre cannot, then, be both fact and fiction at the same time. It is a tribute to human genius and ingenuity that historical novels have not only been written, but also well written. The name of Sir Walter Scott shines the brightest in the firmament of historical fiction. Many writers have, since the times of Scott, been making use of the path blazed by him in the field of this unique form of fiction.

It is very interesting to survey Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* within the paradigm of the historical novel in an eclectic manner. *A Fine Balance* is a very powerful creative work where post colonialism is evident at each and every stage. It is a fact that post colonialism itself is a significant stage in human history. No one can be oblivious to its inhuman nature. Man is born free and it is in the fitness of things that he should remain free. To divest a nation of its basic human right to think freely, live freely and enjoy freely is the most cruel and callous joke of history. Yet, colonialism is a fact that no pious perceptions can ever succeed to wish away. Some mysterious forces come into play unseen and the Almighty of today roll as rubble in the dust and degradation of time. Otherwise, the inhuman inequalities would get perpetuated.

Shelley, the rebel, voices these sentiments in *Ozymandias*, a wonderful poetic composition, highlighting the fact that even the mightiest of the mighty are made the laughing stock with the passing of time.

It is one of the most tragic facts of time that disunited and enfeebled India has fallen a prey to the marauding colonizers and conquerors again and again after about 100 A.D. This protracted and painful history of India brought the East India Company to India. Later on, the British Queen began to (un)settle the destiny of India from a far-off metropolis named London. Even this will pass- says a well known song. So, even the British were compelled to down the shutters of their colonial shop in India. This fateful event took place on August 15, 1947. This also marks the post colonial history of India. The entry of India into the post colonial phase was neither the first nor the last fact in the continuous history of India. Most other colonies also gained their liberty in the years that followed. Post colonial situations in almost all the countries were marked by anxiety and anguish. The colonial rulers had survived and held on because of their matchless efficiency in controlling distant and disparate areas. Situations in newly independent nations almost everywhere became chaotic, sooner in some countries and later in others. The situations in many African countries are a cause of concern even today. In India also, the events conspired in such a way that Madame Indira Gandhi took recourse to the imposition of Emergency to ensure her continuity as the arbitress of the destiny of the post colonial India. This most unfortunate twist in Indian history has provided the setting for Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

A historical novel is "a narrative which utilizes history to present an imaginative reconstruction of events, using either fictional or historical personages or both", remark Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz (110). It is evident that Mistry has presented *A Fine Balance* in so unique a way that the novel bids fair to be appraised as a historical novel. The basic issue that is pertinent here is the relationship between post colonial fiction and the historical novel. Post

colonialism is embedded very deeply in history. In fact, it is the history of the period when an ill-starred nation recovers its liberty once again. It may even be said that the relationship between post colonial fiction and the historical novel is well like the whole-part relationship. Mistry has profited very largely from the guidelines which have got established as a fact that the kinship of Mistry's fiction with the historical novel as a sub-genre of a novel does not, in any way, lessen its glory and glamour as post colonial fiction. The dramatis personae in *A Fine Balance* are martyr-like victims of the Internal Emergency imposed by Madame Indira Gandhi to safeguard her own position. It is, indeed, a mark of Mistry's genius that he has analyzed the paralyzing impact of the Emergency both feelingly and objectively.

The Western Press has always been taking a completely anti-India stand on most controversial issues. They denounced the imposition of the Emergency as an onslaught on the Constitution. Mistry, who was in Canada, also accepted this Western version. In *A Fine Balance* he presents the destruction of the leading characters in the novel in the wake of the Emergency. It can't be said that the position taken up by Mistry is contrary to the reality on the ground. The ruling clique, the top brass in the administration and many other people wielded the Emergency stick so thoughtlessly that they brought all round ruin everywhere. Most inhuman deeds were enacted under the garb of beautification, population control, family planning and other indefensible programmes. Thus, Mistry's version of the Emergency is slightly overdone, though along the right lines in the main. The four main characters who figure in this novel are- Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohlah, Om Parkash and Ishwar. The first two are Parsis and the last two are Chamaars. They all have their history where unbelievable vicissitudes are the order of the day. Mistry takes up their narration in medias res like an epic writer. There is, of course, a very close kinship between the novel and the epic. In fact, a genuine novel is a curious and delightful blend of various pristine genres. It has something of the epic, something of the drama and something even of the poetry. Fielding had all these traits

in his mind when he described his novel as a comic epic poem in prose. Thus, *A Fine Balance* is very much in the Fielding tradition, eclectically and selectively.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry makes a conscious endeavour to update his version of contemporary history. His first novel, *Such A Long Journey*, presents the social history of the Parsis almost exclusively. Shiv Sena men and others appear only to the extent they impinge upon the well being or otherwise of the Noble family. In *A Fine Balance*, the dramatis personae include two Chamaars also. In fact, here Mistry's views are a mirror of the post colonial situation in all the continents. The departure of the colonizing powers leaves some hiatus or vacuum. The political scenario follows the same patterns as found in nature because nature never loves a vacuum. The departing rulers create some void or emptiness that is always filled up by local leadership. The new rulers lack everything that good governance demands. The result is chaos. Such situations prevail in almost all ex-colonies. One is tempted to designate this chaos or impasse as the curse of pre mature transfer of power. The Congress Party itself had been organizing agitations, in season and out of season. As the ruling party, it had to face what the British colonialists had been encountering in the pre-independence days. In short, the political temperature in India was always almost near the boiling point. All this was most unfortunate, most parochial, and most unpatriotic. The ideal settlement would have been, for all politicians, to sit together and fence the problems created by partition, etc. The ruling party is more to blame in all this. When it comes to the times of Madame Indira Gandhi, all the blame falls on her from A to Z.

In a post colonial novel dealing with contemporary or near contemporary politics, references to the political situation on the ground are inescapable. Besides, it is a well established practice of post colonial writers to give free expression to their sense of frustration with the power and political scenario as it unfolds itself in the immediate wake of the transfer of power. It is the misfortune of Mistry that he migrated from India at the time when the country

had to cope with the most tragic and divisive phase of its politics. Like many other great writers from the Parsi community, Mistry too is aware of his debt to his community, his city and his Bombay culture. He suffers like any other Indian, inside or outside of India, when dark clouds of uncertainty began to hover over the Indian horizon. He gives expression to his sense of regret through his limited cast in *A Fine Balance*.

It is, indeed, a stroke of genius that Mistry has presented a woman as the protagonist of his novel. Dina Dalal is indeed a new woman in the sense that she does not cower before the massive forces ranged against her. She is verily a woman designed as a tragic protagonist. Mistry shows how her early years are full of classic joy and happiness. The sky begins to change when she loses the canopy of parental protection. She must submit before the cultural tutelage of her brother. She is a true post colonial protagonist in the sense that she puts up brave resistance while she has nothing to fall back upon or use as shield. She shows extreme boldness and resists marriage with the boy chosen by her brother for her. She resists both Indian and Parsi cultural hegemony when she chooses Rustom Dalal as her spouse. Nusswan, her brother, gives a grudging consent to this match. The couple led a paradisaical life after marriage. Yet, the untimely and accidental demise of her husband throws her back at her brother's mercy once again. She tries to resist this aspect of brotherly patronage once again when she refuses to remarry. This is also resistance, though she has to pay heavy price for this. The novel portrays her heroic struggle to remain viable, but the changing political scenario forces her to fall back on the mercy of her brother. Yet, she emerges as a true tragic protagonist. Her situation becomes more piquant when it is remembered that forces too powerful for her to resist throttle her feeble resistance. She is an individual woman fighting against the political juggernaut of the time. The powers that the political set up acquired during the Emergency destroy her fragile business when her tailors are reduced to virtual cripples. It is not the success or defeat that matters in the case of a tragic protagonist. Rather, it is the courage that such a person musters

to fight against the heavy odds. This, precisely, is the role played by Dina Dalal. Her story is a protracted tale of resistance to various forces bent upon to snuff out her independence. This is an epic struggle from a mere woman. It is a tribute to the talent, mastery and artistry of Mistry to have conceived such a powerful post colonial protagonist in the guise of a Parsi woman.

It is imperative that there is a peep into the background of the family history of the tailors. They belong to the Dalit community. Narayan, a member of their family, is stiff-necked and refuses to toe the line of the landlord-goonda lobby. This leads to high-handedness. Narayan, Dukhi and the women members of their family are actually burnt alive. Om Parkash and Ishwar had been apprenticed to a tailor in the town. They reach Bombay in response to Dina Dalal's advertisement. Their absence from home saves their souls. Otherwise, they too might have met the same fiery end. Yet, Dharmasi does not forget his enmity towards the two. When he gets his chance during the Emergency, he gets them castrated, resulting in the loss of legs by amputation. Thus, these poor Chamaars suffer inhuman torture. They end up becoming actual beggars. There are many more instances of the sufferings that other characters undergo. Rupa, Dukhi's wife, demands oranges from the gardener. He exploits her, showing that the honour of an untouchable woman was at the mercy of the higher caste people. There is one more incident where Buddhu's wife is tortured when she refuses to go into the fields with the son of the landlord. Ibrahim, the Muslim agent of the landlord, is dismissed when he grows old. He too has to eke out his existence as a beggar. Poor Ashraf is beaten up by the police so badly that he dies as a consequence. There are numerous instances of doctors and other leaders following the worst and inhuman ways to meet their targets under the Family Planning Programme. Mistry's aim is to show that India is just like Hell for the people who happen to be poor. There are grandiose laws advocating reforms and other humanizing steps. Yet, all this is only on paper. Laws are enacted as if the legislatures were playing to the gallery. There are standing instructions that any deaths that occur in the course of the implementation of reforms

should not be recorded. Even when there was no Emergency, the inhuman burning of Dukhi and his clan never formed the subject of an F.I.R. Thus, the scenario that this novel projects is depressing and dehumanizing. Historians often wax lyrical when they talk about the glory that was Ind. It may have been in the hoary past. But, in the backward regions of India, this glory has lost all its humanistic sheen. The human beings consistently practise domination and resistance, making colonialism and post colonialism an almost universal way of life.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry has described a large number of instances where repression, a symptom of colonialism, is in operation. It assumes the form of exploitation. It is only the use of force that makes exploitation possible. Exploitation signifies paying less and getting more, or getting something without paying anything by a naked display of power. Thus, exploitation is possible only through violence. Mistry packs his novel with countless instances where the weaker people are suppressed by blatant use of repression. The fable mainly projects the tragic circumstances which make the existence of Dukhi and his kith and kin a tale of misery and woe. The upper-class Thakurs of the village, where Dukhi resides, are a typical set up of exploiters. There is a sort of permanent war of nerves between the untouchables and the higher class groups. Mistry demonstrates the tight stranglehold that the higher caste lobby imposes upon the weaker sections. These mighty people resort to violence, off and on, to keep the intrepid untouchables under their heel. The picture of India that emerges before the reader through this panoramic view of India is highly depressing. Ben Jonson makes the beast fable a device for showing the lowly nature of characters in *Volpone*. When an objective and realistic view of the doings of the powerful people of the village is taken, the reader will feel that these men and women are more bestial than human. In *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, Yeats sums up his sense of disillusionment in highly evocative verses: "Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare/ Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery/ Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,/ To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free,/ The night can sweat with terror as before" (176).

Yeats is totally discontented with the breach of faith that had been an article of faith with the colonial British set up. Major political concessions were promised to Ireland during the First World War. The British administration virtually repudiated these concessions; rather they tried to recapture the same tight stranglehold by using unprincipled power. It appears that power and humanism ill-go together. The misuse of power has its own logic. It is the manifestation of this tendency that Dukhi and his relations face in a remote Indian village.

Novelists generally present a sweeping and fast passage of time as they near the conclusion or ending of the novel. Many novelists have been grilled about how they conclude the story. George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* has a sensational ending. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ends with the hanging of the heroine. Henry James sends the heroine back to Rome in *The Portrait of a Lady*. He remarks that the whole story is never told. Mistry's ending of the novel is equally unexpected. To bring the people and not to give them a chance to voice the anguish of their souls is not a wonderful finale. Anyway, it is the privilege of the writer to end his work as he likes. A happy ending has been suggested in the case of *King Lear*, but it is finally the tragic and traumatic end that the readers favour. Post colonial writers rewrite history. But, it is not an easy task. It is a part and parcel of post colonial resistance. Such efforts may not always be on the right lines. Differences of caste, class, creed, gender, race and religion work against making the nation a homogeneous whole.

There are a large number of other figures who reel under the destructive impact of the currents and cross currents of post colonial history. Self rule and independence are sentimental clichés. The colonizers succeed because of their meticulous and coordinated efficiency. They enforce law and order, discipline and obedience with the brutal and naked use of oppressive force. The departure of these oppressive and unwelcome outsiders is an occasion to celebrate. It is a fact of history that all norms were gleefully violated during the Restoration period because people wanted to get rid of the utter extinguishment of even the ordinary pleasures of

life during the Commonwealth period. The post colonial advent of self rule is treated as an invitation to destroy all discipline. This is the post colonial story in each and every country. It is said that some external agency imposes discipline when indiscipline crosses all limits. Perhaps, India had also reached this unfortunate stage immediately before the imposition of the Internal Emergency in India. This political bombshell is like the proverbial elephant because no one has comprehended or commented on this most unfortunate impasse in the post colonial history of India. The most common consensus about the Internal Emergency regards this political factor as the most retrograde, reactionary and undemocratic twist in India's history. Mistry has dramatised the devastating impact of the draconian measure that was taken by Madame Indira Gandhi. *A Fine Balance* is, after all, a microcosm of what was taking place all over India. It was total dehumanization, degeneration and degradation of all that is grand about India- democracy, humanism, secularism, etc.

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